Why Librarians Should Care about the National Broadband Plan

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In addition to a record snowfall, something else fell upon the inside-the-beltway community in the winter of 2010: The National Broadband Plan. For technology policy wonks, even the name of the plan makes your mouth water. And, yes, here in Washington there was a kind of crazed anticipation leading up to the plan's release. But why should America's librarians care?

Broadband is the new national infrastructure. Just as electricity, telephones, and highways became essential in the 20th century, full participation in life in the 21st century depends on broadband. Librarians know all too well the consequences of having only modest connectivity— for instance, how a library's network slows down midday after the school bell rings. The plan has great potential for increasing broadband capabilities for the library community.

A key component of the plan addresses the federal E-rate program, which provides telecommunications discounts (to the tune of something like $100 million per year) to bene fit libraries across the country. Some of the major initiatives for improving the E-rate program—an important part of the American Library Association's national policy agenda—are highlighted in the plan. The plan calls for simplifying the application and disbursement processes, raising the funding cap, increasing the resources available for necessary internal modifications, and looking for other ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the program.

The plan also calls for the creation of a National Digital Literacy Program to promote the deployment and use of broadband, which has gotten everyone excited. One part of this program calls for new funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services to improve broadband connectivity, including support for hardware and training.
Another component of this program calls for the creation of a Digital Literacy Corps to conduct training and outreach in communities that have low levels of broadband adoption.

One last area that warrants highlighting calls for a new effort to help libraries and other community anchor institutions (such as schools and healthcare facilities) to obtain improved

broadband capabilities and associated training, applications, and services. By working together, community institutions will be able to obtain more broadband for less money.

In this short article, we can only point to a few of the many proposals contained in the National Broadband Plan (which weighs in at a hefty 360 pages). In addition to the specific proposals that can benefit the library community, it should also be pointed out that the overarching goal of broadband service is access for all-something we librarians can well appreciate.

Ultimately, the National Broadband Plan is only a plan. True, it has an impressive pedigree as it was mandated by Congress in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the big stimulus package). And also true, momentum for the plan is continuing, with various congressional hearings, think tank panel sessions, and exhortations by public policy and lobbying groups occurring. But whether real change will happen remains to be seen.

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